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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ROME 000058

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: Declassify 01/16/2028  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [IS](#) [JO](#) [VT](#)  
SUBJECT: (C) VATICAN LIKELY TO UP CRITICISM OVER ISRAELI  
CAMPAIGN IN GAZA

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REF. A: 08 TEL AVIV 2630  
Ref. B: VATICAN 0003

THIS IS AN EMBASSY VATICAN CABLE BEING TRANSMITTED FROM EMBASSY ROME  
FOR TECHNICAL REASONS

CLASSIFIED BY: Rafael Foley, Pol Chief; REASON: 1.4 (b), (d).

Summary and comment  
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¶1. (C) The Vatican is likely to condemn the Israeli campaign in Gaza more forcefully if the civilian death toll continues to rise. The Holy See supports Israel's right to self-defense, but considers the Israeli military campaign deeply counterproductive in the long-term. The Vatican is equally concerned about the suffering of the civilian Palestinian population. In response, Caritas has launched a 1.5 million Euro fundraising campaign for humanitarian assistance for Gazans. A Caritas medical center and a Catholic school were reportedly hit by Israeli bombs.

¶2. (C) The Vatican hopes that there will be an end to military operations soon. If so, a planned papal visit to the Holy Land will proceed in May. In anticipation of the trip, Israel and the Holy See are accelerating negotiations over outstanding Church tax and property issues. Even if the Holy See doesn't turn off the Pope's trip, these talks and relations with Tel Aviv will be strained until the military campaign's effect on civilians is ameliorated. End summary and comment.

Israeli actions counterproductive  
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¶3. (C) The Vatican point person for the Middle East, Monsignor Franco Coppola, told DCM and visiting EUR/WE desk officer on January 13 that the Holy See will feel compelled to criticize in stronger terms Israeli operations in Gaza if more Palestinian civilians are caught in the Israeli-Hamas crossfire. The Holy See supports Israel's right to live in peace and security, and understands Israel's need to defend itself from Hamas' shells and mortars. However, the Holy See's view is that it is not possible for Israel to beat Hamas militarily, and that Israeli actions will in fact help Hamas recruit fighters, particularly among relatives of Palestinian civilian victims of the current fighting.

Papal trip still "under study", but planning underway  
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¶4. (C) The official line from the Vatican regarding a possible visit of the Pope to Israel is that it is "under study". Unofficially, indications are that planning is well advanced for a May trip (ref A). Coppola affirmed that the Vatican has no pre-conditions for this trip, including no requirements for a

resolution of outstanding tax issues or the controversy over Pope Pius XII failure to denounce the Nazis. However, the visit would be cancelled if the fighting continued and the Pope would be at risk or else seen as endorsing Israeli actions by his visit. The Gaza crisis would preclude a visit "today", Coppola said, but the Vatican hopes that the military operations would end soon, and in any case will not be prolonged until May.

15. (C) On the tax and property issues that have prevented the conclusion of complementary agreements to the 1993 Israel-Holy See Fundamental Agreement, Coppola said there had been modest progress. The Israelis have made a proposal that addresses Vatican concerns regarding municipal taxation of Church property; the Vatican is studying it. The next plenary meeting of the Israeli-Holy See commission negotiating these issues had been moved from June to April, in the hope that an agreement may be reached before the Pope's visit.

16. (SBU) The papal trip to the Holy Land would include Jordan, the West Bank and Israel. In Jordan, the Pope would visit the site in the Jordan River where Jesus Christ was baptized; Mount Nebo (from which Moses saw the Promised Land); and Amman. In the West Bank, the Pope would visit the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and meet with Palestinian authorities elsewhere. In Israel, the Pope would visit Jerusalem.

Concerned about the Humanitarian situation in Gaza  
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17. (C) During an Embassy dinner January 13 commemorating twenty-five years of formal U.S.-Holy See relations, the Vatican's Under Secretary for Relations with States, Monsignor Pietro Parolin, reiterated to the DCM the Holy See's preoccupation with humanitarian conditions in Gaza. Parolin said that Caritas Jerusalem (the Holy Land branch of Caritas International, the

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humanitarian arm of the Catholic Church) had issued a Euro 1.5 million (USD 1.98 million) appeal, and that response to the appeal was going well. On January 14, L'Osservatore Romano (the Vatican's newspaper) published further information about the appeal and about the destruction of one of Caritas' medical centers in Gaza during an Israeli operation.

18. (C) In addition to the Caritas medical center, Monsignor Coppola said that the school and the residence of Catholic Religious in Gaza's Catholic parish have also been hit by Israeli bombs. All Church personnel had evacuated the area, and there were no casualties.

Comment  
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19. (C) Breaking news from Gaza, particularly on civilian deaths and damage to non-military objectives, is likely to trigger stronger Holy See criticism of the way in which Israel is conducting its military operations against Hamas (ref. B). This should not in our view--at least under current circumstances--preclude a papal trip to Israel in May. Nevertheless, it is likely to reinforce a persistent Vatican view that it is largely the actions of the Israeli government that makes peaceful co-existence in the Holy Land difficult. This view can also strain ongoing negotiations over outstanding Fundamental Agreement issues, which Coppola himself acknowledged the Israelis are now more keen than the Vatican to conclude.

110. (C) The current conflict could also reinforce the position of those in the Vatican who believe there is little point in trying to address Israeli sensitivities regarding the role of the Catholic Church in World War II, including the likely beatification of Pope Pius XII.

111. (C) In its pursuit of equilibrium among the different moving parts of the Holy See's complex relations with the State of Israel and the Jews, the Vatican will try --as much as

possible-- to differentiate criticism of Israeli actions in Gaza from all other issues. Hence, when Cardinal Martino, head of the Holy See's Justice and Peace Council, publicly compared Gaza to a "concentration camp," the Vatican spokesperson promptly disavowed the view. Ultimately, however, the Pope will place over all other considerations his responsibility to serve as a global moral authority and to call for peace in such situations.  
End comment.

GLENDON SENDS  
SPOGLI